

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

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### Statement

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#### **STATEMENT OF JAMIE RAPPAPORT CLARK, DIRECTOR, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES REGARDING THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM CENTENNIAL ACT OF 2000**

June 15, 2000

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify on this proposal for celebration of the centennial of the National Wildlife Refuge System. As the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, I have as one of my priorities ensuring our land base remains a vital and contributing part of conservation in America. We are grateful for Chairman Saxton's longstanding support for the National Wildlife Refuge System and his recent introduction of the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act of 2000. The Act closely mirrors proposed legislation Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt transmitted to Congress earlier this year. It would pave the way for efforts to strengthen the conservation legacy of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's premier network of wildlife lands, as it enters its second century.

I have put a great deal of personal effort in advancing a strong and healthy National Wildlife Refuge System, and I am committed to using the Centennial milestone as a way to advance our broader conservation goals for the Refuge System and the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Refuge System is a place where all of our conservation programs come together, and it is where we demonstrate both to and for the American people all we do on behalf of wildlife.

Let me state for the record that I am completely opposed to recent proposals to tear apart the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by removing the National Wildlife Refuge System. This irresponsible and ill-considered suggestion would destroy the only federal agency dedicated solely to fish and wildlife conservation and would be detrimental to furthering comprehensive conservation efforts nationwide. The Refuge System relies on the resources and expertise of other conservation professionals within the agency, and in turn, reinforces the effectiveness of all other Fish and Wildlife Service programs.

The Centennial is one of the greatest opportunities for the Fish and Wildlife Service, our partners, and Congress to work together to align all our complementary efforts on behalf of fish, wildlife, plants and the American people. On the cusp of the Centennial anniversary, nearly 100 years after President Theodore Roosevelt established the first wildlife refuge at Florida's Pelican Island on March 14, 1903, we have much to look back on and be proud of. The National Wildlife Refuge System now includes 524 refuges and more than 2,000 small prairie-wetland areas where waterfowl breed. This 93-million-acre network of prime wildlife habitats safeguards hundreds of endangered species; millions of migratory birds; some of our nation's most significant fishery resources; big game such as bison, caribou, and elk; and all kinds of other plants and animals. It is the only system of federal lands dedicated first and foremost to wildlife, and there is nothing else like it in the world.

While the National Wildlife Refuge System has evolved over nearly 100 years, its value to our society has remained steadfast. Today, the System enjoys unprecedented support among a wide variety of stakeholders because of its unique contributions to conservation and its special role in connecting the American people with our wild heritage.

We have made great strides for the National Wildlife Refuge System in recent years because of growing interest and support from Congress, conservation organizations, and community partners and volunteers. Marshaling this stronghold of support can help make the Centennial anniversary a pivotal moment for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Centennial presents a unique opportunity to create synergy on a number of issues and make the National Wildlife Refuge System more vital to conservation than ever before. Before I describe what the Fish and Wildlife Service envisions for the Centennial and the importance of the Centennial Act, I would like to put this opportunity in perspective by noting some of the accomplishments and challenges we currently face.

Congress has demonstrated strong support for the National Wildlife Refuge System in recent years through landmark legislation such as the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. This law gave the Fish and Wildlife Service a firm foundation for managing the Refuge System by providing a clear conservation mission and establishing priority wildlife-dependent public uses. The Refuge System Improvement Act sets forth improved processes for ensuring that refuge uses are compatible, including comprehensive conservation plans for individual refuges and enhanced partner and neighbor involvement in refuge management decision-making and programs. The Improvement Act also emphasizes efforts to enhance public understanding and appreciation for the Refuge System, particularly through refuge recreation and education programs.

Toward that end, Congress passed the Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998, recognizing the vital role volunteers and partners play in the vitality of the Refuge System, and providing means to bolster volunteer initiatives and increase community partnerships. Also in 1998, Congress for the first time addressed the Refuge System's road maintenance needs along with those of other federal land management agencies in major transportation legislation, providing \$100 million over 5 years in the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Congress has recognized the National Wildlife Refuge System's extensive resource needs by providing significant funding increases in recent years. In 1998, Congress approved the largest funding increase in the Refuge System's history in an effort to address existing backlogs in operations and maintenance, and since then has continued this support through the annual appropriations process. This Congressional support reinforces the dedication and growing interest of numerous conservation organizations, especially the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, or CARE. CARE is an unprecedented coalition of 18 conservation groups that includes Defenders of Wildlife and Safari Club International. Despite their disparate perspectives, all these organizations recognize the myriad values embodied in refuges, and in 1996, joined forces to find long-term funding solutions so that the Refuge System can fulfill its conservation mission. With a combined membership representing 13 million people, CARE has helped advance bipartisan Congressional support for the Refuge System and advocated funding increases in the areas we need most. Some CARE member organizations including the National Audubon Society, Wilderness Society, and National Wildlife Refuge Association also have special programs dedicated to stronger stewardship, partnerships, and public outreach for the Refuge System.

The Service's relationship with organizations such as these has flourished. Refuge community partnerships

now number nearly 200. These local groups support individual refuges through volunteerism and public outreach programs. The number of volunteers supporting the National Wildlife Refuge System (about 30,000) is more than ten times the number of its actual workforce. Volunteers perform 25% of all work on refuges nationwide. Given those figures, it is easy to see why these programs are so important to a healthy and vibrant Refuge System.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has initiated a number of efforts to invest in the future of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The most important long-term effort is *Fulfilling the Promise*, a comprehensive "road map" for addressing a broad range of the Refuge System's major needs to effectively carry out its mission. Developing *Fulfilling the Promise* began a few years ago when the Fish and Wildlife Service mobilized its workforce and partners to thoroughly examine the history and status of the Refuge System and chart its course into its next century. These efforts culminated in the first-ever national gathering of all refuge managers, Service leadership, and more than 200 partners at a conference in Keystone, Colorado, in 1998. With our road map now in hand, the Fish and Wildlife Service is focusing on improved wildlife and habitat management policies and programs; better public recreation policies, programs, and facilities; enhanced partnerships and public outreach; and leadership and career development.

*Fulfilling the Promise* is helping us travel further toward our destination, sowing the seeds of these partnerships and allowing Congress' vision to take root. But we still have a long way to go. All of us who care about the future of wildlife must seize this historic occasion as a means to come together and renew our commitment to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

We view the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act of 2000 as the cornerstone of our efforts to strengthen the conservation legacy of the Refuge System and encourage the American people to discover this network of natural treasures. The Act commemorates the proud legacy of this nation's efforts in conservation through the Refuge System over the past century and can set the course for the Refuge System to reach its potential in its next 100 years. It would be instrumental in fostering broad public understanding and appreciation for the Refuge System, enhancing partnerships on its behalf, and strengthening its stewardship and infrastructure. The Act's provisions for establishing a Centennial Commission and a long-term plan to address the Refuge System's priority operations, maintenance, and construction needs would reinforce all the things the Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners are doing to strengthen the Refuge System.

The idea for a Centennial Commission with distinguished members from the private sector and high-profile organizations was modeled after a similar group that oversaw the National Park System's successful Centennial celebrations in the 1970s. These efforts included a series of special public outreach projects as well as a world conference on parks. Our plans for the Refuge System's Centennial have similar goals, such as enhancing educational opportunities and fostering long-term relationships that lead to a much broader support base from partners and the private sector. A Centennial Commission would breathe new life into existing partnerships, bring fresh perspectives and foster new relationships of lasting value for the Refuge System and the future of wildlife conservation.

Chairman Saxton's legislation also endorses Secretary Babbitt's direction to the Fish and Wildlife Service to develop a comprehensive plan to address its major resource-related needs on the ground. The Administration's Centennial Legacy Plan will outline the Refuge System's priority needs in the areas of operations, maintenance, and construction. We will submit this plan to Congress later this year.

Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida illustrates the needs of most refuges and what we hope

to accomplish with the Centennial Legacy Plan. The birthplace of the National Wildlife Refuge System is still managed by one person and one boat, just like in the days of Theodore Roosevelt. A place which could serve as a premiere site for showcasing the story of the Refuge System has no facilities or programs for visitors, and development pressures on surrounding lands threaten to seriously jeopardize its value as a thriving breeding area for birds. The Plan will assess and prioritize needs such as these within the entire National Wildlife Refuge System and outline a plans to address these needs in a systematic and targeted manner.

When I visit national wildlife refuges, my experiences leave me with mixed feelings. I am both proud and concerned. I am amazed by the ingenuity of our workforce and partners in doing so much for these special places with so little. The National Wildlife Refuge System is critical to the future of this nation's wildlife, and there is no better time than the Centennial anniversary to come together to celebrate and honor these magnificent conservation lands as well as our refuge staff and partners.

This concludes my prepared statement, and I would be pleased to respond to any questions.

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